# THE ORDINARY, THE ETHICAL, AND THE SPIRITUAL CONFUCIAN REFLECTIONS

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*Abstract: Writers from different spiritual traditions have emphasized the importance of attending to the perspective of ordinary humans in our ethical reflection, rather than just being preoccupied with the ways of thinking that characterize specialized intellectual communities. The paper discusses the implications of such an emphasis on the ordinary and proposes that closely attending to the perspective of ordinary humans leads to distinctive modes of both non-normative and normative ethical reflection. These modes of reflection, in turn, lead to the conclusion that ethical progress has to do largely with a transformation of our outlook on life, a transformation with characteristics that can be described as "spiritual" in an ordinary usage of the word.*

## I. The Ordinary and the Familiar

At around age fifty, Leo Tolstoy underwent a spiritual crisis, questioning the meaning of life in the face of one's inevitable death. He was held back from suicide by another line of thought that eventually led to a transformative experience. The crisis and subsequent transformation are recorded in *A Confession*, and this other line of thought involved his thinking to "the enormous masses of people," many of whom are "poor, simple, unlettered folk" but who lived contentedly without questioning the meaning of life (Tolstoy, 1882, pp. 39-40, 52). In his words:

> This force compelled me to turn my attention to the fact that I and a few hundred similar people are not the whole of humankind, and that I did not yet know the life of humankind (Ibid., p. 41).

His initial error was to

> … while reasoning about life, overlook the whole life of humankind that surrounded me on all sides." (Ibid., p. 41). Instead, "… in order to understand life, I must understand not an exceptional life such as ours who are parasites on life, but the life of the simple laboring folk ... (Ibid., p. 41).

Tolstoy's emphasis on the unlearned in our reflections on life is similarly voiced by Rabindranath Tagore in his *The Religion of Man.* While commenting on the idea of *mukti*, or liberation of the soul, he notes:

> We constantly hear men of scanty learning and simple faith singing in their prayer…. They may not be prompt with an intelligent answer if they are questioned about the deeper import of the song they sing, but they have no doubt in their mind, that the abiding cause of all misery is not so much in the lack of life's furniture as in the obscurity of life's significance (Tagore, 1931, pp. 182-183).

In a similar fashion, he adds that

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> The simple man of the village knows what freedom is – freedom from the isolation of self, from the isolation of things, which imparts a fierce intensity to our sense of possession (Ibid., p. 184).

This emphasis on simple and ordinary people in our reflections on life is occasionally voiced by professional philosophers. For example, Iris Murdoch, herself also a literary writer, speaks of "those important movements of return from philosophical theory to simple things which we are certain of" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 40). For her, "… a theory … is the more attractive the more it explains, the more its structure may be seen as underlying things which are familiar to us in ordinary life." (Ibid., p. 33)

How, then, does attending to simple and ordinary humans bear on our reflection on the fundamental issues of life, or, in short, our **ethical reflection**? Doing so will obviously help our understanding of their way of life, but clearly, for these authors, our doing so also provides lessons about how we ourselves should live. In contemporary terms, our doing so will have both **non-normative** implications in the sense of **understanding** certain phenomena of ethical significance in the life of ordinary humans, and **normative** implications for how we ourselves **should** live.

Another theme common to the writings of these authors is the idea of spirituality. Tolstoy's transformative experience is often described as a spiritual transformation in an ordinary sense of the word, and he himself explicitly comments on the spiritual. For example, in his essay "Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves," he describes a human as "both a spiritual and an animal being," adding that it is important for one to be moved by one's "spiritual essence." (Tolstoy, 1890, p. 56) The idea of the spiritual runs through Tagore's writings, as when he characterizes religion in terms of an "evolution from efficiency in nature towards the perfection of spirit" and the soul as a human's "spiritual self" that strives for a "spiritual emancipation." (Tagore, 1931, pp. 202-203, 179-180, 240) Murdoch also repeatedly refers to the spiritual, as when she remarks that the very "existence (of love) is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good." (Murdoch, 1970, p. 100) Their shared emphasis on both the ordinary and the spiritual suggests a potential linkage between the two. How, then, does attending to the life of ordinary humans lead us in the direction of the spiritual?

In what follows, I discuss how attending to the ordinary has both non-normative and normative implications for our ethical reflection and potentially leads in the direction of the spiritual. As indicated in the sub-title of the paper, its ideas are inspired by Confucian thought. But they are also intended to be appealing on their own grounds; accordingly, I will not refer to any specific Confucian idea in the main discussion but will defer indication of this connection to footnotes and to the concluding comments.

Let us start with the idea of the ordinary and the familiar. In recorded history and across cultures, there are various experiences and concerns of significance to human life that most humans share. Examples include fear of death and grief upon the loss of a close one, and a concern to find ways of coping with death, illness, loss, and hardship. Other examples include the common human tendency to pridefulness or impulsive forms of anger, and a concern to manage such tendencies. These are **familiar** experiences and concerns in that they are shared by most humans across cultures and times, and there is a commonality to the way **ordinary** humans undergo such experiences, where ordinary humans include most humans, both the unlearned and the learned. For example, when one experiences the fear of death or an impulsive outburst of anger, though the learned might have an additional intellectualized conception of what one is experiencing, the way they themselves undergo such experiences is no different from that of the unlearned.

The main proposal of the paper is that, in our ethical reflection on these familiar experiences, it is important to attend to the perspective of ordinary humans in the sense of the way most humans (both the unlearned and the learned) themselves experience the relevant phenomena. Doing so will help highlight distinctive modes of **non-normative** and **normative** ethical reflection, which we will discuss in sections 2 and 4, respectively. As for the bearing on the spiritual, we will proceed in two stages. Section 3 argues that the mode of non-normative reflection that focuses on the perspective of ordinary humans leads to the conclusion that the way we interact with situations of ethical significance often has characteristics akin to a form of perception. On this basis, it introduces the term "outlook" to refer to an enduring quality of a person that underlies a certain pattern of perception in a certain area of life. Section 5 argues that the mode of normative reflection that focuses on the perspective of ordinary humans leads to the conclusion that ethical progress is, to a significant extent, a matter of developing certain kinds of outlook on life with certain common characteristics. Section 6 proposes that a transformation in outlook that exhibits these characteristics can be described as a 'spiritual' transformation in an ordinary usage of the word. Section 7 concludes with a summary and a brief comment on the linkage to Confucian thought.

## II. Two Modes of Non-Normative Reflection

For familiar experiences such as anger or grief, the experience has two aspects: the way a situation impresses itself on the person and the way one responds to the situation. The two are intimately connected as the former shapes the latter. The word "experience" is intended to encompass both aspects, and we will sometimes speak of one's "being affected by and responding to" a situation to highlight both aspects.[1]

Non-normative ethical reflection seeks a systematic reflective understanding of the nature of familiar experiences of ethical significance, and we will refer to them as **intellectual commentators**, or commentators in short, those who seek such understanding. A commentator's reflective observations might derive from two kinds of interests. One might primarily be interested in understanding the **perspective** of the ordinary human – the way she is affected by and responds to her environment, and the way **she herself** understands and conceptualizes her experiences. We will refer to this as a **perspective-based** mode of reflection. Alternatively, one's interest might primarily be in addressing certain intellectual agendas shared within a specialized intellectual community to which one belongs, **agendas other than understanding the perspective of someone undergoing the experience**. We will refer to this as an **agenda-based** mode of reflection. Correspondingly, we will refer to comments deriving from these two modes of reflection as perspective-based and agenda-based, respectively.[2]

To illustrate the difference, consider an experience of anger. A perspective-based mode of reflection seeks to capture how things look from the perspective of someone undergoing the experience, such as how she views a certain remark by another as a personal affront, or how her attention is fixated on this aspect of the situation to the exclusion of other aspects attending to which would have mitigated her anger. An agenda-based mode of reflection can take many different forms, geared toward intellectual agendas other than understanding the perspective of the person. For example, it can be a neurological or evo-

[1] Confucian texts refer to these two aspects of our interactions with our environment using two separate terms, often translated as "being affected by" (*gan*) and "responding to" (*ying*).

[2] In Shun (2021b), I presented the distinction in terms of one between "practitioner-based" and "commentor-based" modes of reflection.

lutionary account, with the corresponding comments on anger framed in those terms, which are not part of the ordinary human perspective when undergoing such an experience. As these comments seek to address the agendas of a specialized intellectual community, they often cannot be fully grasped except by those with the relevant intellectual training. The same is true of other scientific accounts of human experiences, such as a physicist's account of ordinary perceptual experiences, framed in terms of conceptions that are not part of ordinary humans' own perspective on their perceptual experiences.[3]

The agenda-based mode of non-normative reflection is present not just in the sciences, but also in other areas of inquiry. For example, in a widely known debate between scholars Hu Shih and D. T. Suzuki on the nature of the Chan (or Zen) enlightenment experience, Hu approaches it from a historical perspective, detailing how the corresponding conception evolved in China, while Suzuki focuses on its nature as seen from within the perspective of someone who has undergone that experience. As Suzuki puts it, this is a contrast between understanding the experience "from the outside" versus "from the inside" (Suzuki, 1953, pp.25-26; Hu, 1953).

The agenda-based mode of reflection is also found in contemporary philosophizing. For example, emotivism provides an account of the use of moral language against the background of a certain conception of what is factual, in terms that are not part of an ordinary human's own perspective on one's use of such language. Likewise, an account of how weakness of the will is possible framed against the background of a certain specialized conception of human agency is not part of the perspective of the ordinary human who is afflicted by weakness of will.

The distinction between two modes of non-normative reflection is not a distinction between two kinds of commentators, as the same commentator might make both kinds of comments. For example, for a specific virtue, one and the same commentator might both describe the virtuous person's perspective on things and provide an account of the social value of the virtue, the latter not being part of the virtuous person's perspective by virtue of which she is virtuous.

And both modes of reflection might serve their own respective legitimate purposes. The agenda-based mode of reflection, whether in science or philosophy, is directed to agendas that arise within the respective intellectual communities. Sometimes the agendas, when broadly stated, might be shared across cultures and times, such as an astronomer's concern with a scientific explanation of the relative motion of the Earth and the Sun, or a philosopher's concern with how it is desirable for humans to live. Sometimes the agendas might be specific to a certain culture and time and hence of primarily historical interest, such as a philosopher's attempt to make sense of the use of moral language against a specialized conception of what constitutes a fact.

As for the perspective-based mode of reflection, it naturally arises in the context of a direct practical interest in helping ordinary humans live better.[4] For example, a Buddhist or Confucian master advising others on how to manage their impulsive outbursts of anger will focus on the psychological dynamics at work as seen from the perspective of someone subject to such outbursts. Being reflective, the master might put together a more systemat-

[3] A similar point is noted by Pierre Hadot (1995): 253.

[4] This is the primary concern of Confucian thinkers, resulting in the perspective-based mode of reflection being their dominant mode of non-normative reflection. See Shun (2021a).

ic and reflective account of what has been learned from such mentoring activities for the benefit of future generations, and the resulting treatise on anger will primarily exhibit the perspective-based mode of reflection. This emphasis on capturing the perspective of ordinary humans can also be found in certain literary works, such as Tolstoy's, as well as in certain philosophical works.[5]

A perspective-based account is something ordinary humans can resonate with as a more systematic depiction of the way they themselves view their own experiences. As such, it also engages more directly with their day-to-day ethical concerns. Someone regularly subject to outbursts of anger could resonate with and benefit from what is conveyed in a Buddhist or Confucian treatise on anger, and reading such works as well as other masterful literary works with the same focus can illuminate our own understanding of our psychological experiences. One way in which highlighting this mode of reflection is relevant to contemporary philosophizing is that doing so can bring our philosophizing closer to ordinary people's day-to-day ethical concerns.

Another way in which it can be relevant is to help us avoid a risk that we may refer to as a conflation of purposes. Consider, for example, a neurological account of anger. It is not problematic for the commentator to **describe** experiences of anger in such terms; doing so serves a legitimate intellectual purpose. But it would be problematic for the commentator to **ascribe** such conceptions to the perspective of someone undergoing an experience of anger, as if the person were oneself experiencing the anger in neurological terms. Any reflective observation about the perspective of ordinary humans on their own experiences should be based on a careful examination of their perspective, and it would be a **conflation of purposes** to ascribe, without such an examination, agenda-based conceptions that serve other purposes to the perspective of ordinary humans. Such conflation of purposes is not uncommon in contemporary philosophizing.

For example, consider the idea of the equal intrinsic worth or value of humans, often understood in Kantian terms. The idea plays an important role in a certain theoretical understanding of the human condition, with important practical implications for social and political thought. But the idea emerged in a certain historical and cultural context, and it would be problematic to ascribe the idea to the perspective of ordinary humans as if it were part of their own perspective when undergoing familiar experiences that transcend cultures and times. This happens when a commentator describes one's treating another with respect in terms of the former's acknowledging the latter's "intrinsic value," a value that the latter has by virtue of being "capable of evaluating her situation for herself and setting her own goals accordingly," or that one is "in effect saying… 'I acknowledge your dignity'." (Buss, 1999, pp. 796-797; 802). It also happens when modesty is characterized in terms of an "evaluative belief" in the "fundamental similar worth of all human beings", or when resentment is characterized in terms of a defense of "the moral value incarnate in my own person (that I am, in Kantina language, an end in myself)," or when forgiveness is characterized in terms of one's "regaining full conviction in a belief about the egalitarian nature of moral status." (Ben-Ze, 1993, p. 237; Murphy, 1988, p. 18; Bennett, 2003, p. 139). The relevant experiences are shared by the masses of humanity who live in other cultures and times, and it would be problematic to ascribe to them the conception of intrinsic value understood in a specialized philosophical sense that emerged in a certain historical and cultural context, as if that conception were part of their own perspective when undergoing such experiences. Even for a philosopher with a Kantian bent, while the con-

[5] Some examples of such philosophical works are those of Iris Murdoch (such as her depiction of the attitude of a mother-in-law toward her daughter-in-law) and Bernard Williams (such as his observation about 'one thought too many'), as well as certain works on feminine ethics.

ception might inform his reflective account of these experiences, it is questionable whether it is part of the way he himself experiences things when he undergoes the experiences, just as a neurological account of anger is not part of the way the neurologist experiences his own anger.[6]

And what is ascribed by an intellectual commentator to the perspective of ordinary humans without grounding it in an actual examination of the perspective of humans need not be some specialized intellectual conception. For example, in response to the intellectual question regarding how compassionate responses are possible, some might explain the possibility in terms of one's imaginatively projecting oneself into the other's position. While the answer is framed in terms of language that is accessible to ordinary people, and while this kind of exercise in imagination might take place in some instances, they are absent from many instances of compassionate responses, such as when we spontaneously extend our hand to pull back the child when we suddenly see a child about to run into the path of an oncoming bus. It would be problematic to ascribe such an imaginative exercise to someone undergoing such an experience simply because of one's own intellectual preoccupation.[7]

Other than bringing our contemporary philosophizing closer to the day-to-day ethical concerns of ordinary humans and helping to avoid the risk of conflation of purposes, highlighting the perspective-based mode of reflection also helps bring into focus the perceptual nature of the way we experience situations of ethical significance, a point to which we now turn.

## III. The Perceptual Metaphor[8]

The way we are affected by and respond to our environment can sometimes be described in familiar philosophical terms, such as the distinction between the cognitive, volitional, and affective. When one goes shopping and finds a suitable item on sale, one might judge that this is the least expensive suitable item, decide on that basis to purchase it, and feel pleased at the low price one pays. These are separable elements in the way one interacts with the situation – one could have made that judgment without deciding to purchase the item, and could have purchased it without feeling pleased. But if we attend closely to the perspective of ordinary humans, the way they undergo many familiar experiences of ethical significance cannot easily be described in such terms, but have characteristics more akin to a form of perception.

Consider a student who has become totally devastated and paralyzed upon receiving yet another batch of rejection letters from medical schools, concluding five years of unsuccessful applications with no realistic hope of future success. Parents or teachers might try to steer her to a different perspective by, for example, inviting her to shift attention to her other talents and how these might prepare her for an equally fulfilling career, or to think about how her present setback would appear quite insignificant in twenty years. They might invite her to think about historical figures who, after some serious setback,

[6] Pierre Hadot makes a similar observation about how the Copernican revolution does not alter the way one experiences a sunset, even for the astronomer. See Hadot (1995): 253.

[7] This is a contemporary variation of a well-known example of Mencius (4th century BCE) about how humans would respond with compassion upon suddenly seeing an infant crawling toward a well (*Mencius* 2A:2). For further elaboration, see my discussion of Michael Slote in Shun (2021b): section 5.

[8] The main ideas in this section have been presented in Shun (2021a).

went on to great accomplishments, or to think of this setback in other terms, like a child's inevitable fall when learning to walk. But whatever they might say to her, and however much she might agree, even agreeing that this setback should not have the towering significance that she **sees** it as having, her sense of devastation would not go away until she comes to have a shift in **perspective** that involves her coming to **see** her present setback in a different light.

Unlike the example of shopping, it is not possible to describe the student's relation to the situation in terms of separable elements such as the cognitive, volitional, and affective. While we can say that she judges that her present setback has doomed her future, her response is not something derived from that judgment, but instead, that judgment is part and parcel of her whole experience; it is in so responding that she forms this judgment. And her altered response, if it does come about, is not primarily a matter of an alteration in her judgment – she could have agreed that the present setback does not have the towering significance she ascribes to it while her sense of devastation persists.

There are many other examples of this nature. Consider someone with a deep-seated bias against members of a minority group. Even if the person comes to be sincerely convinced that he should treat them as equals, the bias lingers and subtly manifests itself in various ways, such as a pattern of avoiding sitting next to members of that group in public transportation without his consciously choosing to do so. That he does, in some purely cognitive sense, believe that he should treat them as equals can be seen from his embarrassment or self-blame when that pattern is brought to his attention. But, despite that belief, he does not really **see** these individuals as equals until the deeply entrenched bias has been truly rooted out, which again involves a fundamental shift in the way he **sees** the minority group. Another example is the "as if" mentality.[9] When commemorating a deceased parent at her graveside, one's thoughts, sentiments, and demeanor might be such that it is **as if** the deceased parent were present – one might, for example, be silently conversing with her in one's heart. Or one might try to counter one's prideful tendency when interacting with a junior colleague by deliberately viewing her **as if** she is a rising star in the field.[10] In these examples, the way one is affected by and responds to a situation involves a complex package with intertwined elements that is naturally describable in perceptual terms.

That this is so is likely due to certain parallels with visual perception. "Seeing" in a visual context might refer to what is visually presented, what is salient among what is visually presented, or what is visually presented under certain modes of conceptualization. As I walk through a plaza, there are things that I "see" without noticing (but can recall afterward if asked) and things that I "see" in the sense of consciously attending to them, as well as certain modes of conceptualization that shape what I "see" in either sense (e.g., "I see a couple engaged in a heated argument"). Put briefly, seeing in visual perception involves both organization and conceptualization, the former having to do with the placing of certain features of what is visually presented at the center of one's awareness, while structuring other features around it in a more peripheral manner. That which is more central is what I focus attention on or is more salient. The organization and conceptualization together shape my overall perspective on what is visually presented, and different kinds of organization and conceptualization can yield very different perspectives, as illustrated by the two contrasting ways of viewing the duck-rabbit diagram. Again, in the case of the

[9] Early Chinese texts, such as the *Odes* (*Shijing*), an ancient collection of poems, and the *Analects* of Confucius (6th-5th century BCE), are filled with examples of the "as if" mentality, conveyed using the term *ru*.

[10] This is a contemporary variation of an example in *Analects* 12.2.

duck-rabbit diagram, the different ways of viewing it are not derived from the different beliefs involved (e.g., the belief that this is a duck's beak as opposed to a rabbit's ear); instead, the different beliefs are part and parcel of the different perspectives.

Just like visual perception, when our mind is affected by and responds to a situation it is mentally aware of, there are things it focuses attention on and things it is aware of without conscious attention, as well as certain modes of conceptualization that shape the way things come to its awareness. The organization and conceptualization again shape one's overall perspective on the situation. In the example of the student, her initial response involves her focusing attention on her setback to the neglect of other relevant aspects of her situation that she is aware of, such as how her academic record prepares her for other promising careers. She conceptualizes her setback as decisively dooming her future, and perhaps also conceptualizes other aspects of her academic record, to the extent they come to her attention, as leading nowhere. These different elements together yield an overall view of the situation that is bleak and dismal. When she finally comes to accept her setback and proactively redirects her life, these elements shift in their shape and their interconnections. The current setback is still prominent, but now conceptualized instead as a test of her endurance and perseverance. It no longer displaces from her attention the other aspects of her interests and past performance; instead, the latter become more prominent and are viewed as pointing to other promising career paths. The alternative organization and conceptualization of what her mind 'sees' yield a different overall perspective on the situation that is more optimistic and forward-looking.

There are also similarities in relation to other perceptual terms, such as "looking." For example, we speak of "looking at" in the visual context in the sense of focusing visual attention on, and "looking for" with an added element of searching. Our mind can also focus attention on certain aspects of a situation, as well as focus attention with an element of searching. In the process of arriving at her new perspective, the student might have, whether on her own accord or under guidance from advisers, mentally "looked" more carefully at her other interests and past performance, "looking" for an alternative and realistic career path before eventually settling on one.[11]

This similarity between the operations of the mind and visual perception is not surprising. The way we see things visually, as characterized by a certain mode of organization and conceptualization, is itself an operation of the mind and not of the eyes as such.[12] Furthermore, the fact that the mind often operates in this manner in relation to what is presented, whether visually or mentally, is also not surprising. What we are presented with, whether visually or mentally, have unlimited details and aspects, and we cannot be attending to everything equally. The way we organize and conceptualize what has been presented enables us to be selective and interpretative in a way that allows us to make sense of what has been presented (Hadot, 1995, pp. 253-254).

We introduced the perceptual metaphor in relation to our interactions with situations of ethical significance in which, unlike the shopping example, the way one is affected and

[11] In the pre-modern Chinese language, this operation of the mind is conveyed by the term *si*, a term often translated as "thinking." The translation could be appropriated if thinking is construed not as a deliberative process, but as the process of 'thinking of' something such as one's hometown – one focuses attention on ('look at') mental images of scenes from one's hometown and seeks ('look for') images of scenes that do not immediately come to mind.

[12] A point highlighted in a Confucian text *Daxue*, one of the Four Books, whose title is often translated as *Great Learning.* Confucian texts often compare the operations of the mind to those of the senses – e.g., *Mencius* 6A:7, 6A:15.

one's response are interwoven and not easily separable. This inseparability is also true of certain special kinds of perceptual experiences, and this accounts for another way in which the operations of the mind and of the senses are similar. For example, when one smells a bad odor, one's judgment that the odor smells bad and one's response of disgust and shunning the odor cannot be easily separated; it is in so responding that one makes that judgment. Similarly, when the mind interacts with situations of ethical significance, the way it is affected and its response are often interwoven and not easily separable. For example, it is in responding with horror and disgust to someone torturing a baby for sadistic pleasure that one judges that the act is inhumane and that one must intervene; these judgments cannot obtain, in the form they do, without one's responding in this manner.[13]

So far, most of the examples we considered have to do with the way one experiences – viz., is affected by and responds to – a specific situation, such as the student's response to the latest batch of rejections or the "as if" mentality in one's commemoration of a deceased parent. By contrast, the example of discriminative bias illustrates a more enduring trait that underlies the way one interacts with members of a minority group on various specific occasions. Whether one is still subject to subtle bias or not leads to different patterns of interactions. Given the perceptual nature of the interactions on specific occasions, the relatively enduring state of the mind that accounts for the pattern of interactions may also be described in perceptual terms, and we will refer to such a state as an **outlook** of a person. For example, someone who has truly rooted out one's discriminative bias has now altered one's outlook and has come to truly **view** members of the minority group as equals.

A reorientation in outlook of this kind is familiar to us in many areas of life. It is the goal of certain educational practices, such as providing young children with the immersive experience of living in a developing country, thereby nurturing in them an understanding of what it is to live a life of poverty and deprivation that engages them more intimately and pervasively, affecting the way they **view** the poor and deprived in future interactions. The goal is to instill a certain kind of **ethical outlook** in the sense of an outlook that underlies a pattern of interactions of an ethically desirable kind in a certain area of life. In addition to the examples of rooting out discriminative bias and of childhood education, another example of ethical outlook, as illustrated by the situation of the student, is the way one confronts the adversities of life in general, being able to stand apart from and not be overwhelmed by adversities, and exhibiting an attentional flexibility that enables one to proactively redirect one's life.[14] Yet another example is the way one responds to wrongful personal injury, being able to stand apart from the injury, not fixating on one's loss and sense of grievance, and being able to view the situation with due attention to all its relevant aspects and respond accordingly.[15] That way of viewing wrongful injury would have led to, for example, the response of the bishop to Valjean's act of theft in *Les Misérables*, or Gordon Wilson's response to the bombing by the Irish Republican Army in which he lost his daughter and was physically injured.

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[13] The example of smelling bad odor is from the *Great Learning*. It is often cited by Wang Yangming (1472-1529) to illustrate the point that the ideal kind of ethical response is one in which one's judgment about how to respond resides in the response itself and is not something separable from and guiding it.

[14] Confucian texts such as the *Analects* and the *Mencius* use the term *ming* to talk about the unavoidable adversities of life, and convey this ethical outlook by speaking of understanding *ming* and accepting *ming*. See Shun (2023).

[15] This kind of ethical outlook is conveyed in Confucian texts in terms of the idea of a higher form of anger – see Shun (2015).

The term "ethical outlook" involves the normative judgment that certain patterns of interactions in different areas of life are indeed ethically desirable for humans. We turn now to the distinctive mode of normative reflection resulting from an emphasis on the perspective of ordinary humans that grounds such judgment.

## IV. Two Modes of Normative Reflection

In citing examples of ethical outlooks in the previous section, we relied on certain ethical convictions that most of us share. We do regard it as a desirable educational goal to expand the sensitivity of children to poverty and deprivation, and as desirable that, when confronting the adversities of life, we are able to stand apart from the adversities and be able to more proactively redirect our lives around them. This might be difficult to do in the face of some devastating occurrences, as when a mother just learns of the loss of her son at war, but we do regard it as desirable that, with appropriate passage of time, one be able to get past the initial reaction and move on with one's life.

The same is true of our responses to wrongful personal injury. Impulsive responses to such injury, especially to deliberate insults, might be a common human tendency, but we do find it desirable to eventually be able to stand apart from and not fixate on the injury and sense of grievance, and be able to view the situation with due attention to its relevant aspects and respond in a more measured manner. Such sentiment is reflected in the way we advise someone consumed with anger to step back from the situation, and in the way we assess what constitutes progress in life in relation to one's responses to personal injury. The responses of the bishop or of Gordon Wilson might be difficult for most, but the fact that we find their responses admirable illustrates the same point. Another common human tendency is pridefulness, and as the example of the junior colleague illustrates, we do find it desirable that we move past such prideful tendencies and be respectful in our interactions with others.

There are many other examples of ethical convictions that most of us share. We find it desirable that a normal parent-child relationship exhibits certain characteristics, such as a parent's being sensitive to the well-being of her child. And we are touched by human qualities portrayed in masterful literary works, such as the messages of love in Tolstoy's short stories written after his spiritual transformation. While the ordinary person might not be able to further explain why these are desirable human qualities, these qualities do have ethical appeal to us as humans, and the related considerations are part of and provide common ground in the ordinary ethical discourse of humans outside of the context of specialized philosophical discussions. Invoking such considerations might involve drawing to the audience's attention certain examples from history or literature, or inviting the audience to imagine how she herself might respond to certain situations in the hope that she also resonates with what one has proposed.[16] By citing such shared ethical convictions, one seeks to make what one is proposing ethically appealing to the audience.

Suppose we say that a normative proposal has **ethical appeal** if it is grounded in certain deep-seated convictions that most humans share, deep-seated in the sense that these are convictions we are confident about and would find difficult to abandon. The perspective-based mode of non-normative reflection assumes that there are certain familiar experiences shared by most humans across cultures and times, and that there is a commonality to the perspective of ordinary humans on such experiences. Similarly, an **appeal-based**

[16] The latter strategy is often used by Mencius – e.g., *Mencius* 2A:6, 3A:5.

mode of normative reflection assumes a commonality to certain deep-seated ethical convictions that most humans share by virtue of being human. These convictions often have to do with our conception of what is important to us as humans, or our conception of what it is to be human. Close personal relationships are something of value to us as humans, and we do not wish to become the kind of beings devoid of such relationships. Conversely, we share views on constraints against killing and injury, and would describe extreme instances of deviation, such as torturing a baby for sadistic pleasure, in terms of what is 'inhuman.'[17] These deep-seated convictions also inform our thoughts about the kind of human we aspire to be. We are, for example, inspired by ideals of compassion and humility, and by the life and acts of various admirable individuals recorded in history or portrayed in literature.

Defending a normative proposal by reference to its ethical appeal differs from another mode of normative reflection often found in the philosophical literature, which, for convenience, we will describe in terms of the idea of **ethical justification.**[18] Here, the term is used as an umbrella term to cover the kinds of normative reasoning that contrast with ethical appeal in certain ways. In defending a normative proposal by reference to ethical appeal, we cite certain generally shared ethical convictions that we expect the audience to also resonate with. These considerations can be varied, depending on the different areas of life at issue, and to the extent that these are shared convictions one is confident about, we do not raise any further question about why we should endorse such convictions. The kind of reflection that invokes ethical appeal does not require a high degree of intellectual sophistication and is something that ordinary people, without any specialized intellectual training, can partake of.

By contrast, in seeking an ethical justification for a normative proposal, even these shared convictions could themselves be questioned. There is a more persistent questioning of why we should endorse what we do endorse, with the goal of unraveling a few basic considerations that can provide the starting point for arriving at normative conclusions in different areas of life. To tease out these basic considerations, one might consider various hypothetical situations as a way of clarifying our thinking in a certain area of life, often with the goal of abstracting certain basic considerations that can ground our normative views in other areas of life. These basic considerations, which can invoke such ideas as rationality or human well-being, then provide a minimal starting point for developing a more systematic, elaborate, and comprehensive account of the ethical life for humans. Unlike the appeal-based mode of reflection, this mode of normative reflection is a much more intellectualized process that seeks to, in a deliberative and structured manner, derive from a few basic considerations certain specific normative conclusions in various areas of life. Such an intellectual process requires a relatively high degree of intellectual sophistication that is more typical of a philosopher or someone with the relevant intellectual training, and is not part of the ethical discourse of ordinary humans. For convenience, we may refer to this as a **justification-based** mode of normative reflection.

In contrasting the two modes of normative reflection, the point is not to be critical of the justification-based mode of reflection but to highlight the appeal-based mode as something also important to our ethical thinking. Just as the perspective-based and the agenda-

[17] This is Mencius' point when, in *Mencius* 2A:6, he describes as "not human" someone not being moved by compassion upon suddenly seeing an infant crawling toward a well. The account of human nature he is generally known to hold is primarily an account of what constitutes our humanity – he uses the term *xing*, usually translated as "nature," interchangeably with the term *qing*, which has the early meaning of what is genuinely the case, with the implication that the *xing* of humans comprises what makes one a genuine human.

[18] I discussed the contrast between ethical appeal and ethical justification in Shun (2021a).

based modes of non-normative reflection serve different but equally legitimate purposes, these two modes of normative reflection play complementary roles in the formulation of our overall reflective conception of how humans should live. The shared ethical convictions that the appeal-based mode of reflection invokes are collectively too 'thin' to ground a whole way of life, and need to be supplemented by considerations that are independent of them and that can provide guidance on the many ethical issues on which there are no broadly shared and deep-seated convictions. Examples include setting up the political system, responding to social changes and technological advances, as well as all kinds of ethical dilemmas. Furthermore, the justification-based mode of reflection could serve as a basis for critiquing certain social practices that participants in such practices might not question, and even for challenging, up to a certain extent, the kind of ethical convictions that are generally shared. On the other hand, the appeal-based mode of reflection invokes shared ethical convictions that, until they have been successfully challenged, collectively provide a framework within which the justification-based mode of reflection should take place. Indeed, some of these convictions are so central to the very conception of our own humanity that we would regard abandoning them as detracting from what makes us human. For example, the importance of close personal relations is something that any acceptable justification-based mode of reflection has to take into account – a conception of 'morality' that renders the moral life incompatible with personal relations would call that very conception into question.[19] Furthermore, the appeal-based mode of reflection is accessible to ordinary humans as such, not just trained intellectuals, and it brings our normative discourse closer to the daily concerns of ordinary humans.[20]

The appeal-based mode of normative reflection provides the basis for our describing certain outlooks as ethical outlooks – the desirability of cultivating such outlooks is based on deep-seated convictions that most humans share and are confident about. Ethical outlooks generally share certain features that characterize the idea of spirituality on one ordinary usage of the term, and we will highlight two such features in the next section.

## V. Ethical Outlooks

It follows from the desirability of ethical outlooks that a main task in ethical development is to cultivate the appropriate outlooks, not just to develop the capacity for a deliberative mode of decision making. Sometimes, the need for deliberation does not arise, as in the way the bishop responds to Valjean's act of theft. Sometimes, the need for deliberation does arise, as when one deliberates about how best to help an elderly person being harassed on the subway. But even in such cases, the deliberation operates in the context of the way we view the situation, including our view of what the relevant considerations and salient options are. Ethical progress to a significant extent involves cultivating the appro-

[19] This consideration underlies the philosophical discussions of the question how personal relations might be made compatible with consequentialist or Kantian ethics.

[20] Michael Oakeshott (1989) also discusses the complementary relation between what he refers to as two forms of moral life. While the second form of moral life he refers to is like what we have referred to as the justification-based mode of normative reflection, his first form of moral life has to do with what he calls habits of affection and behavior that one has been brought up with in a particular culture. This is different from the kind of shared ethical convictions that we mentioned in connection with the appeal-based mode of reflection, such convictions being shared by humans across cultures and times and hence are not specific to local culture. This is not to deny the importance of local culture in our normative reflections, but this aspect of our ethical life is not the focus of this paper.

priate ethical outlooks, which encompass both the way one is affected by and is moved to respond to situations one confronts, and which either render further deliberation unnecessary or provide the appropriate framework for such deliberation when the need arises. Such ethical outlooks pertain, so to speak, to the inner life or mode of being of the person, going beyond a capacity for deliberation and decision-making.[21] The kind of outlooks that have ethical appeal for us share two common features, one concerning the process of cultivating such outlooks and the other their content.

Regarding the cultivation of ethical outlooks, there are different ways to facilitate it.[22] Sometimes, this is not something that one consciously works toward, but just comes with certain life experiences, like the kind of childhood educational experiences described earlier. And the influencing factors could be the kind of influences one is exposed to on a day-to-day basis, such as the kind of people one associates with or the kind of political dynamics one witnesses on TV.

Sometimes, one might seek to develop certain outlooks through self-conscious efforts to directly manage the operations of one's own psychology. We can invoke imagery to alter the way we experience a situation, as when, to counter my inattentive and dismissive attitude when interacting with a junior colleague, I try to view her as if she is a rising star. If I find myself insufficiently sensitive to some occurrence, I can invoke certain images or memories – images of what a starving child looks like if I am untouched by news of children dying of famine, or memories of how a friend had cared for me when I was sick if I am unmoved by news of her untimely death. Another technique is to actively redirect our attention in certain ways. If I become overly angry because I take an offence too personally, I can try to redirect attention away from how I have been personally slighted and toward the situation as a whole – what the circumstances are in which it transpired and what would be an appropriate response, setting aside my personal grievance.

Sometimes, there can be an interplay between more passive and more active processes. For example, the student devastated by her failure to be admitted to medical school might follow, in a more passive manner, guidance from parents or teachers and, in that context, make active psychological efforts to follow the advice. And sometimes, one can make active efforts to expose oneself to experiences of certain kinds to allow oneself to be influenced, in a more passive manner, by the experiences. For example, one can seek to overcome one's prejudicial sentiments by deliberating and associating more closely with members of a minority group. Another example is the life of Siddhartha as portrayed in Herman Hesse's novel of the same name. Siddhartha actively sought liberation from the self by joining the ascetics, then the order of the Buddha, fell back to a worldly life, till he became enlightened by the side of a river under the subtle influence of a fisherman.

We just used the word "enlightened" to make a specific point. In the end, despite all his active seeking, the state Siddhartha sought had to 'come to' him, something he could hope for but not deliberately bring about. This point is true in general of the cultivation of ethical outlooks – whatever path one follows, success is never guaranteed. Even when one makes conscious efforts to directly manage the operations of one's own psychology, one might still not come to see things in the desired manner. And when the change does come, one often experiences it as a transition to clear awareness, with things 'lighting up.'[23] That

[21] Cf. Murdoch (1993): 52-54 and Murdoch (1999): 77-78, 80-81. This point is repeatedly emphasized in Confucian thought, such as in the description of ethical progress in terms of an enhancement in *zhi*. The term *zhi*, though often translated as "knowledge" or "understanding", refers to a way of viewing the world that, in its highest form, is characterized by clarity and illumination.

[22] I discussed the subject in Shun (2021a).

[23] This kind of experience is conveyed in Confucian (as well as Chinese Buddhist) texts using two terms *jue* and *wu*, the former emphasizing one's being clearly aware and the latter emphasizing the

kind of shift in vision is well portrayed in Western art and literature, such as in Tolstoy's portrayal of Ivan Ilyich's shift in perspective toward his own death at the final moment, or Valjean's transformation as portrayed in the musical *Les Misérables*. Obviously, the shift in vision need not occur in a dramatic fashion. But even when it happens gradually, it is still experienced as a transformation that comes to one and that one would, on looking back, describe in terms of how one has now 'come to see things clearly.'

One can try to describe what that enlightened state is like, whether as an observer or as someone in that state, and such a description can be communicated in words, even recorded in texts as a teaching. But a person does not come to be in that state through endorsing what has been communicated. As in the example of discriminative bias, one can sincerely endorse what has been communicated but still not see things in the relevant way. Linguistic communication at best inspires one to work in a certain direction, but the actual shift in vision is never guaranteed and is something that comes to one when it does come. A corollary of this point is that the state of mind that characterizes a certain ethical outlook is not primarily a matter of one's having certain beliefs or theoretical accounts of the world. The truly ethical person need not have a reflective conception of such accounts and, even if she does, it is not by virtue of endorsing such accounts that she is ethical.[24]

Turning to the content of ethical outlooks, the examples we considered share a common characteristic that may be referred to as a state of 'no self,' a state that has to do with an outward direction of attention away from oneself, whether through downplaying the undue significance one initially ascribes to oneself or through expanding one's sensitivity to the needs and concerns of others.

The former is illustrated by the way one overcomes impulsive outbursts of anger through shifting attention away from one's sense of being disgraced by certain kinds of treatment toward a more balanced view of the situation; the corresponding outlook involves one's downplaying the undue significance that one previously attaches to the way one is treated by others.[25] Similarly, the student's overcoming her initial response of devastation involves her being able to stand apart from the adversity she presently confronts; the corresponding outlook involves one's downplaying the undue significance that one attaches to the personal adversities that one inevitably confronts in life, and one's being able to instead redirect attention proactively to other worthwhile activities. Such a shift in outlook can happen with the way one views one's own death; Tolstoy's spiritual transformation involves his moving away from his initial preoccupation with his own inevitable death, and a similar change is depicted in Ivan Ilyich's transformative change at the final moment. Valjean's transformation in *Les Misérables* also involves his moving away from his fixation on his past harsh treatment in the name of the law and his resulting hatred of the world, turning instead to a life of compassion for the poor and deprived.[26] All these examples involve a sense of one's independence from or being able to transcend the external conditions of life, which enables one to respond with equanimity to adverse situations one confronts.

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transition from being deluded to being clearly aware. The state of enlightenment is the focus of discussion of Stace (1952).

[24] A point that the Confucian thinker Zhu Xi (1130-1200) explicitly highlights.

[25] This shift in outlook is conveyed in Zhu Xi's comments on two contrasting forms of anger – see Shun (2015).

[26] Confucius and Mencius convey this proactive attitude toward the adversities of life by speaking of understanding or accepting *ming* – see Shun (2023).

In addition to this sense of independence, another kind of ethical outlook that involves an outward direction of attention to others has to do with an expanded sensitivity to the needs and concerns of others. The example of giving young children more intimate exposure to a life of deprivation shows that we do idealize the expansion of such sensitivity. The same point is illustrated by the way we find admirable the kindly act of the bishop or the selfless dedication of the transformed Valjean in *Les Misérables*, and by the way we are touched by the messages of love in Tolstoy's post-transformation short stories. While this kind of outlook also involves an outward direction of attention away from oneself, it is not primarily a matter of downplaying the undue significance one initially places on oneself. Instead, it involves an extension of the kind of special concern one has for oneself and for close ones to the human community more broadly.[27]

The different kinds of ethical outlooks that we have considered are often connected. For example, someone who views personal hardships with relative equanimity is also less likely to view wrongful injury of oneself as a personal affront, and someone who is loving and kind to others is also less likely to be subject to impulsive outbursts of anger. This connection is grounded in a common feature that runs through these outlooks, namely, a shift of attention away from oneself and outwardly toward others through an alteration in the relative significance that one attaches to oneself and to others. Accordingly, the different ethical outlooks can be regarded as different aspects of a single ethical outlook characterized by this common feature; they serve to identify different aspects of this single state of the mind that have to do with different patterns in the way one is affected by and responds to situations one encounters in different areas of life. In Asian traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism, this overarching outlook is often referred to as a state of 'no self,' but similar ideas can also be found in other spiritual traditions, though without invoking this specific notion.[28] This overarching outlook may also be characterized in terms of the idea of humility understood in a broad sense, one in which humility is contrasted with pridefulness in the broad sense of placing undue significance on oneself and/or paying sufficient attention to others.[29]

Considering the preceding discussion of the process of cultivating ethical outlooks, we may add two additional comments on the state of no self. First, it is not primarily a matter of one's having some 'metaphysical' belief or theoretical account of the world. While linguistic communication may play a catalytic role in facilitating progress in this direction, one does not come to be in that state through endorsing what has been communicated. Instead, it involves a fundamental shift in one's way of viewing the human community and the world as well as one's place therein, a view that informs the way one is affected by and responds to one's environment. While intellectualized discourse may sometimes play a catalytic role in helping to steer the audience in that direction, this catalytic role can also be performed, often more effectively, by presenting something other than intellectual accounts, as the latter might lead to a fixation on intellectualization that goes against the desired shift in vision. This is why various spiritual traditions have resorted to storytelling, paradoxes, or other kinds of shocking devices to induce in their audience a shift toward an alternative frame of mind, and why thinkers from different traditions have urged their audience to transcend the intellect.

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[27] The idealization of such expanded sensitivity is highlighted by Mencius (e.g., *Mencius* 2A:6) and conveyed in later Confucian thought in terms of the idea of forming one body with all things – see Shun (2020).

[28] For example, though without invoking the notion of no self, Murdoch (1970) speaks of "unselfishness" and a process of "unselfing" (82) and idealizes a state of one's seeing oneself "as nothing" (100-101). See Shun (2018) for a discussion of the idea of no self in Confucian thought.

[29] See, for example, Wang Yangming: no. 339 and Murdoch (1970): 100-101.

Second, we have so far been commenting on the state of no self in general terms, such as shifting attention outwardly away from oneself, which includes downplaying the undue significance one previously attaches to oneself and expanding one's sensitivity to the well-being of others. But in addition to these general descriptions, the idea of no self also describes the way things present themselves to someone who has approximated that state. From her perspective, her having expanded her sensitivity to the well-being of others leads to a sense of connectedness to others, as if she has incorporated others into herself through the broadening scope of this sensitivity.[30] Also, having downplayed the undue significance that she previously attached to herself, she experiences the change in terms of her former self having now disappeared from her view. There is still awareness of herself as distinct from others in an ordinary sense, but there is no longer the emphasis on herself that makes her stand apart from others in a special way.[31] These two dimensions of her perspective on the world also warrant the description of her state in terms of "no self", where the term describes not just an observer's perspective on that state but also the perspective of someone who has approximated that state.

## VI. The Idea of Spirituality

With this discussion of ethical outlooks as background, we turn now to the idea of spirituality. The concern is not with the use of the word "spiritual" as such, but with a state of existence that exhibits certain special characteristics that are often associated with the idea of spirituality in one ordinary usage of the term, a usage on which certain ethical or religious traditions are often described as spiritual traditions. In this usage, the spiritual is a certain direction of development of the ethical that exhibits at least five characteristics, the first four of which we have already discussed.

First, the spiritual life involves a fundamental transformation of one's outlook on life, altering the way one is affected by and responds to one's environment. This transformation affects various interconnected elements of one's psychology, including one's thoughts and sentiments, the way one directs attention, one's motivations and aspirations, and so forth, a transformation of a kind that, for reasons already discussed, warrants description in perceptual terms.[32]

Second, the transformation involves one's coming to have a sense of independence from the external conditions of life. Whatever happens, whether these involve significant personal losses, frustration of one's dedicated endeavors, or personal injury by others, one is not fixated on what transpires and is not overwhelmed by one's own emotional responses. Instead, one responds calmly with a clear view of the situations one confronts, an

[30] The sentiment is akin to that discussed in the psychological literature in terms of the idea of 'self-other merging' or 'perceived oneness' – see Cialdini (1997).

[31] In Shun (2018), I put this point in terms of the disappearance of the 'emphatic self'.

[32] Pierre Hadot introduces the term "spiritual exercises" in a similar fashion, presenting such exercises as leading to a transformation of not just "thought" but also "imagination and sensibility," and to "a transformation of our vision of the world" as well as "a metamorphosis of our personality." He adds that the transformation involves one's replacing oneself "within the perspective of the Whole", or one's "becoming eternal by transcending oneself," gesturing toward those aspects of the transformation that converge on the idea of no self. See Hadot (1995): 81-82.
Cf. Hadot 81-82, on how the expression "spiritual exercise involves not just thoughts but also imagination and sensibility, how it involves a transformation of our vision of the world and a metamorphosis of our personality.

equanimity anchored in a sense that these external conditions of life do not carry the kind of significance that humans ordinarily assign to them.[33]

Third, the transformation involves an expanded sense of connectedness to, or union with, other humans and things. This can take the form of an expanded sensitivity to and compassionate concern with the well-being of all things; even if not, there is still a sense of one's merging into the universe, or a sense of cosmic unity. [34] To the extent that it takes the former shape, this aspect of the spiritual is often connected to the second aspect about independence from the external conditions of life. The ability to transcend one's external environment allows one to have the attentional flexibility that is needed for a continued dedication to the well-being of all things despite personal loss and setbacks, while this dedication in turn facilitates such an ability. Tolstoy's spiritual transformation, or Valjean's transformation as depicted in *Les Misérables*, illustrates how loving concern for others and the ability to stand apart from personal loss or misfortune come hand in hand.

Fourth, building on the previous three characteristics but focusing more on the internal perspective of someone who has progressed in this direction, the spiritual life involves an altered view from within of oneself in relation to the world. Having downplayed the undue significance one previously attached to oneself and expanded one's sense of connectedness to other things, one has the sense of a disappearance of one's former self from one's view, as well as an emerging sense of oneself as incorporating others or as part of a larger whole. The idea of no self describes the content of this outlook.

There is a fifth characteristic that we have not yet commented on, but is closely connected to the previous four characteristics. In introducing the idea of enlightenment, we discussed how the shift in vision involved in spiritual progress is experienced from within as a transition to clear awareness, in terms of one's coming to see things correctly as they are. Accompanying this sentiment is a sense of one's responding to some reality that draws one, a sense of a connection to something larger than oneself that guides one's life. For want of a better term, we may describe this as a sense of the 'transcendent', a sentiment conveyed in various forms in different traditions, such as in terms of God, the Good, Heaven, or some other kind of apparent entity.[35] While this presentation of the sentiment might seem to suggest a belief in some 'metaphysical' entity or personal deity, one does not come to share such sentiment by virtue of one's having acquired some such belief. On the contrary, it is by virtue of one's coming to share such a sentiment that one comes to present it in such terms, utilizing language that one is familiar with from one's own cultural tradition. What is communicated through such a presentation is primarily an experiential state rather than a theoretical position.[36]

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[33] While sharing this conception of an idealized state of equanimity, Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist thought differ in their respective conceptions of what grounds this state of equanimity – whether it is by (as in the case of Confucianism) a total dedication of oneself to one's ethical and political endeavors which is within one's control and whose significance trumps that of the other external conditions of life, or by (as in the case of Chan Buddhism and Daoism) coming to see how the significance that one ordinarily ascribes to these external conditions of life is illusory.

[34] The later Confucian idea of forming one body with all things idealizes expanding one's sensitivity to and compassionate concern with the well-being of all things.

[35] Tolstoy speaks of God and Murdoch of a transcendent Good, while this role is played by the idea of Heaven (*tian*) in Confucian thought.

[36] This point is highlighted by Mencius when he comments on how humans come to 'know' and 'serve' Heaven through nourishing one's own mind or heart (*Mencius* 7A:1), and conveyed in Confucian thought in general through the idea of 'Heaven and humans coming together as one' as a result of humans' properly nourishing their own mind or heart.

There are other characteristics of the transformation process that are also highlighted in various spiritual traditions, such as how the transformation also involves an alteration in one's outward presentation to others, including not just actual conduct but also one's physical bearing or demeanor. Through such outward presentation and through one's way of life generally, one also has a transformative effect on others, with others being drawn to and feeling inspired by one's example, a phenomenon often associated with the idea of charisma.[37] Without going into these other characteristics in any detail, we will add three additional observations about the spiritual.

First, we have introduced the idea of the spiritual by reference to aspects of human existence that are shared by most humans, such as the perceptual nature of our interactions with our environment and the shared aspiration to develop certain ethical outlooks in life. It follows from this view of the spiritual that the potential and aspiration for the spiritual life is, in a sense, already shared by most humans. This point is conveyed in Buddhist thought in terms of the idea that everyone has Buddha-nature and in Confucian thought in terms of the idea that human nature is good. It is also repeatedly emphasized by Tolstoy and Tagore. Tolstoy describes in *What I Believe* how the love for all humans is humans' "natural state, the state to which children are born, … and in which (they) always live until it is destroyed by deceit, by error, and by temptation." (Tolstoy, 1884, p. 208; cf. 137). And in *The Gospel in Brief*, he compares this natural state of humans to "seeds" sown by God that are often lost due to the "enemy" of "temptation".[38] Tagore makes a similar point by speaking of the "dualism" of human existence, "his existence within the range of obvious facts and his transcendence of it in a realm of deeper meaning." The transition from one to the other is an "evolution … from efficiency in nature towards the perfection of spirit." (Tagore, 1931, pp. 202-203). This state of humans he compares to the parable of two birds in the Upanishads, with "both of these birds in man himself, the objective one with its business of life, the subjective one with its disinterested joy of vision."[39]

Second, when commenting on the idea of enlightenment, we noted that the kind of ethical outlooks that characterize the spiritual life are primarily experiential states rather than an endorsement of some theoretical account. It follows that the spiritual is not something that can be grasped by the intellect through rational considerations as such, but can only be grasped through the appropriate experiences. This point Tolstoy puts in terms of the "irrational knowledge" of the masses of humanity that contrasts with the "rational knowledge" of learned people like himself (Tolstoy, 1882, pp. 43-47). The same point Tagore puts succinctly by saying: "Reality, in all its manifestations, reveals itself in the emotional and imaginative background of our mind. We know it, not because we can think of it, but because we directly feel it." (Tagore, 1931, p. 128) Put differently, "we reach truth, not through feeling it by our senses or knowing it by our reason, but through the union of perfect sympathy." (Tagore, 1931, pp. 170-171) This same point about how the

[37] In traditional Chinese thought, this idea is conveyed through the term *de*, often translated as "virtue" and sometimes as "power" – *de* refers to both an inner quality of the person and the outward transformative effect on others that the person has by virtue of that quality.

[38] Tolstoy (1892): 65-68. Mencius uses a similar vegetative analogy, stating that the germs or sprouts (*duan*) of goodness are already in humans (*Mencius* 2A:6) though they may fail to grow due to various obstructing factors (*Mencius* 6A:6 - 6A:9).

[39] Tagore (1931):135. In a similar vein, Suzuki (1972) describes humans as living in two worlds. "a world of sense and intellect, and a world of spirit… This explains the constant feeling that there is something in our conception of life which is unaccounted for, a feeling which torments us in various ways until the missing part in found." (71-72)

spiritual 'transcends' linguistic communication or intellectualization has been noted in different spiritual traditions and by various thinkers.[40]

Third, an account of the spiritual life is primarily about the inner life of humans, and is by itself not adequate for addressing many of the concrete practical problems of society as a whole, nor for providing concrete guidance in many personal situations that we encounter on a day-to-day basis. There are other modes of ethical reflection more suited for such purposes. Instead, its focus is primarily on a state of existence that most humans, in some implicit manner, are already drawn to, one that involves a sense of peace and calm and a vastness of spirit as the self becomes merged into a larger whole. It is also a state that inspires joy of a special kind, a joy that, as put poetically by Tagore, serves as a criterion of truth: "Gladness is one criterion of truth, and we know when we have touched Truth by the music it gives, by the joy of greeting it sends forth to the truth in us." (Tagore, 1931, p. 105).

## VII. Concluding Comments

The paper discussed how a focus on the perspective of ordinary humans can lead to certain modes of non-normative and normative ethical reflection that contrast with other modes often found in the contemporary philosophical literature. Highlighting the alternative mode of non-normative reflection leads to the view that the way we interact with situations of ethical significance is often akin to a form of perception, thereby bringing into focus the idea of outlooks as enduring states that underlie patterns of perception in different areas of life. Highlighting the alternative mode of normative reflection leads to the view that an important part of ethical progress involves developing certain ethical outlooks whose content converges on the idea of no self, and whose cultivation involves a fundamental transformation in the way one views one's place in the human community and the world at large that is accompanied by a sense of clarity of perception. In one ordinary usage of the word "spiritual," living the spiritual life involves cultivating such an ethical outlook.

As indicated in the paper's subtitle, its main ideas derive from reflections on the nature of Confucian thought, and some of the specific points of connection are indicated in footnotes. More generally, the ideas derive from methodological reflections on the study of Confucian thought, and why it is often inappropriate to frame Confucian ideas in terms of certain conceptions that characterize a common trend in contemporary (Anglo-American) philosophizing.[41] That common trend often engages in the agenda-based and justification-based modes of reflection, and the resulting conceptions are often not suited for the study of Confucian thought, which engages primarily (though not exclusively) in the perspective-based and appeal-based modes of reflection. That Confucian thinkers engage in these modes of reflection is understandable given their primarily practical concern, a concern to make a direct ethical difference to their audience who come from all walks of life and are not exclusively nor primarily intellectuals.[42] For their teachings to make such a

[40] This point is particularly highlighted in Daoist and Chan (Zen) Buddhist thought. It is conveyed by Suzuki (1972) by locating this state of existence in the realm of the "unthinkable" (8-12) which is beyond "intellection" (53-54). Likewise, Schweitzer (2009) speaks of the limits of "knowledge" (107-108) or of "rational thinking" (110-111) in leading us to this state of existence which, for him, is a form of "mysticism" (110, 160-161) that is primarily based on "experience" (137). Murdoch (1993) also discusses similar ideas of Wittgenstein's on the limits of language regarding the ethical (28-30).

[41] I discussed these methodological issues in several past publications – see, e.g., Shun (2009).

[42] I discussed this connection in Shun (2021a).

difference, the way they comment on familiar experiences of ethical significance has to resonate with their audience's own perspective on their experiences, and what they advocate has to engage with ethical convictions that their audience already shares.

This does not mean that these alternative modes of ethical reflection pertain exclusively to thinkers with such a primarily practical concern. Thinkers from other backgrounds might also be interested in a portrayal of the human condition that is accurate to the way ordinary humans themselves view their own experiences, and that aligns with their aspirations. Examples can be found in literary works such as Tolstoy's, in intellectual works such as Tagore's, or in philosophical works such as Murdoch's. And if we adopt this approach in our ethical reflection, we will inevitably be led in the direction of the spiritual, a state of existence that, according to these thinkers, most ordinary humans are already drawn to. Their point, as vividly portrayed in Tagore's parable of the two birds, might not be immediately obvious, but inklings of such can be discerned in familiar human experiences such as the dreams and aspirations of youths or the appreciation of natural beauty.

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